(My) Life in a Community of Friends

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Abstract

Taking up Jacques Derrida's conception of all people's singularity and working through Bernard Williams's approach to the idea of all people's equality, the essay explores a significant changeover underway in our understanding of democracy. Two aspects of this changeover are highlighted. The first concerns a shift from a distinctively modern conception of democracy as having an ideal *telos* to a variation in which democracy is conceived without a *telos* at all. The second concerns a shift from a distinctively modern conception of democratic citizenship that affirms the *likeness* of each citizen to a variation that, paradoxically, stresses *unlikeness*. These shifts are not conceived as simple departures from previous conceptions of democratic politics but as belonging to a faithful recollection of the very experience that calls for democratic politics in the first place: the experience of the friend. Attempting to develop a compelling conception of life in a community of friends that can do justice to both the singularity of each and the equality of all, the essay explores an outlook on democratic politics that promises a future for democracy beyond its increasingly exhausted modern condition.

Keywords: democracy, singularity, equality, friendship, Jacques Derrida, Bernard Williams.

1. Introduction

After two devastating world wars of European origin and a Cold War that threatened global annihilation, the wave of optimism that greeted the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the totalitarian nightmare in the communist 'East' seemed to herald a bright new era for democracy across the world. German reunification, EU enlargement, the introduction of the euro, Obama's election victories in the USA, and the Arab Spring all appeared to signal an upward turn. Faith in democratic progress seemed possible once more. Yet, a sequence of convulsions in societies across the post-War 'West' soon made it clear that we were not entering an age of settled democratic achievement. In 2001, the strange date-named event '9/11' had already provided a moving image of a collapsing world, but as crisis followed crisis, the sense of an accelerating downfall became unavoidable. Not only crises that challenged the preservation of stable democratic societies in Europe – the financial crisis, the eurozone crisis, Russian land seizure, the refugee crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic – but also a sequence of democratic challenges to existing democratic conditions – the votes against the European constitution, the Brexit referendum in the UK, Trump's election victories in the USA, the #MeToo movement, the emergence of the BLM movement, trans-activism, climate activism, eco-activism, Indigenous activism, decolonisation activism, populisms of the left and right. Public opinion became increasingly polarised and cynical, and mainstream parliamentary party politics became increasingly hollowed out – with many citizens in Europe feeling they were being left behind or disenfranchised by the de-localising forces of both commercial and media globalization. In his history of the European present, *Homelands*, Timothy Garton Ash cites the Austrian-German novelist Daniel Kehlmann reflecting that, in what Garton Ash dubs our now 'post-Wall' world, 'something is just coming irretrievably to an end'.[1]

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[1] Timothy Garton Ash, *Homelands* (London: The Bodley Head, 2023), 145.

What if this is exactly right? What if these events in the post-Wall period belong to a world which is fast falling apart? In his book *Man and Technics*, published in English in 1932, Oswald Spengler asserted that, in our time, 'optimism is *cowardice*'.[2] His own unflinching reflections on '*der untergang des Abendlandes*', published between 1918 and 1922, had already anticipated the coming collapse of an exhausted democratic modernity, a collapse that he thought was destined to presage a new age of Caesarism – and he lived to see early Caesar-types arising in the Soviet Union, in Italy, and in Germany. Twenty years after Spengler gave his disturbing prognoses on our time, in an essay entitled 'Spengler Today', Theodore Adorno began by noting that Spengler's ideas had simply been forgotten and had been forgotten 'with the speed that he himself ascribed to world history when he said that it was fast developing the momentum of a catastrophe'.[3] But Adorno did not see this as the end of Spengler's interest for us. On the contrary, 'the course of world history has itself vindicated his prognoses to an extent that would be astonishing if these prognoses were remembered. The forgotten Spengler takes his revenge by threatening to be right'.[4]

The profoundly difficult truth here is that we can no longer say with confidence that our present-day democracies have a long and secure future. In the European present the inner dissolution of the European world has been rapid, deep – and apparently irretrievably final. Can one 'take a stand' against Spenglerian anticipations of the decline of democracy into Caesarism 'without the bad conscience of official optimism'?[5]

Doubtless we need to attend directly and with a sense of urgency to contemporary conditions of democracy. On the other hand, we cannot leave it at that. Of equal urgency today is to explore the historical vicissitudes of our understanding of democracy itself. Here I want to distinguish, especially, two democracy-affirming concepts of democracy, two

[2] Oswald Spengler, *Man and Technics* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1932), 104.
[3] Theodore Adorno, 'Spengler Today' (*Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, Volume IX, 1941), 306.
[4] Adorno, 'Spengler Today', 306.
[5] Adorno, 'Spengler Today', 306.

concepts of democracy that, in their rivalry, virtually define our post-Wall time: democracy conceived with, and democracy conceived without a *telos* of final perfection. It bears stressing that this rivalry takes its present shape right around the time of (in fact on each side of) the fall of the Berlin wall; first with Francis Fukuyama's prescient essay 'The End of History?' published in the summer of 1989 (defending a conception of democracy with a *telos*),[6] and then with Jacques Derrida's engagement with Fukuyama's ideas in *Specters of Marx*, published in 1993 (defending a conception of democracy without a *telos*).[7] In this essay I will make a case for taking Derrida's side here. Moreover, I think engaging on the terrain of this debate today also demands that we see Derrida's original contribution as prescient too. We can no longer hide from the fact that what Fukuyama had regarded as the history-ending 'triumph of liberal democracy' has, as Derrida put it, 'never been so critical, fragile, threatened, even in certain regards catastrophic, and in sum bereaved'.[8]

In our now unequivocally post-Wall times, I want to see how far Derrida can nevertheless help orient us towards a democratic future worth getting behind, and to embrace what, in *Of Grammatology*, he had called the 'world of the future which proclaims itself at present'.[9] As we make a start, it will bear stressing that the world of the future in question here is precisely not the world-to-come that people with what Nietzsche had called 'democratic taste' and 'modern ideas' had projected or anticipated or even wanted to plan for as the end of human emancipation and progress:[10] a perfected condition attained at the end of political history. On the contrary, the world of the future that Derrida anticipates would be a world that will have been 'freed from […] all teleology, all onto-theo-teleology',[11] precisely not some kind of history-ending fulfilment or culminating perfection.

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[6] Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?' (*The National Interest*, No. 16, Summer 1989).
[7] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993).
[8] Derrida, *Specters*, 85.
[9] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 4.
[10] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 54.
[11] Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 87.

We are in an altogether parlous place when it comes to our politics today. Indeed, one might well wonder whether our still officially 'progressive civilisation' still holds a future at all. Finding better than least worst words for democracy is the final intention of this essay. However, in what follows I will not advocate for a more reasonably organised version of our contemporary democratic states nor an altogether different state form that we should strive towards as an alternative ideal. Instead, I will take up Derrida's call to embrace something he identifies as central to 'the European, and *uniquely* European, heritage of an idea of democracy',[12] a quite specific idea of the democratic state's formal essence; namely, as not having one – of being 'without essence'.[13] Following Derrida, I will not construe this (as Plato and Aristotle did) as implying that a democratic state is simply *formless* or irreducibly *multi-form* but as implying a state set-up that must always, in its every here and now, understand its own set-up as open to question. On this conception, a completed democracy must remain incomplete: it must always retain within itself, even within its 'ideal' concept, a void of sorts, a space left vacant for inventive political thinking to come, and hence for the advent of what, in every here and now, can only appear as a 'democracy to come' absolutely beyond the horizon of all present anticipation, beyond all present future-projecting visions of a yet-to-be-created ideal democracy.[14]

If it can already be thought, it does not remain to be thought. Structured by a relation to a necessarily unanticipated arrival, the here and now of every democracy (including every future democracy) is thus haunted by the apparition of a still-to-be-accomplished democracy to come that does not presently appear.

Since Marx, those who cleave to either present day gangster fascism or Marxist socialism have alike wanted completely to eliminate the spectre of communism (fascists

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[12] Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992), 78.
[13] Derrida, *Rogues*, 32.
[14] Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 78, and see also Derrida, *Rogues*, 91.

striving to make it gone; Marxists striving to make it actual). In our time, in a time when the old modern Grand Narrative of Great Progress has all but run out of breath and our democracies seem barely alive, Derrida argues that we need to bring the spectre of democracy, this 'apparition of the inapparent',[15] this shrouded ghost of the future that comes back from a European memory of a democratic world-to-come, back to life – *as* a spectre, *as* a ghost. The point is not to exorcise this spectre of democracy but to embrace it, to welcome it.

'Democracy'. Within the faltering European heritage of this idea, unfolding on a ghost path right inside the long historical elaboration of the *demos* of democracy in Europe as a community of friends – a political community with its focus on what is *koína ta ton philōn* [things common to friends] – we will inventively discover another 'face' of democratic life, a somewhat Nietzschean 'face' in fact. It is the 'face' of life in what Nietzsche had described in terms of a 'democracy' conceived as 'something to come':[16] namely, a politico-economic order that wants and tries, he says, 'to create and guarantee' for each in the all, 'as much independence as possible in their opinions, way of life and occupation'.[17] In what follows I will try to clear a path to this conception by way of a political imperative that arises from what I call 'the singularising gaze' – a point of view that discloses another living being as *both* an altogether other 'me' (not-me) *and* a similar 'me', my equal in singularity (not-not me).[18]

As we shall see, the singularising gaze is exemplified most strikingly in the experience of the friend. But this experience does not stop with the singular one who is

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[15] Derrida, *Specters*, 156.
[16] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human, Part II* (New York: MacMillan, 1913), 345.
[17] Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, 344.
[18] This formulation is intended to recall Donald Winnicott's conception of child developmental maturation: 'from me to not-me to not-not-me'. This structure has previously been applied, via Jacques Derrida, to the 'extraordinary ordinary' by Victor Turner in his book *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 121-2. In this essay, I take it up as the basic structure of the appearing in my life of another such 'my life'.

encountered there. The experienced *rightness* of this relation to the other cannot but give rise to a desire for its political translation in the thought of a community of friends. This is the desire for democracy. As Teilhard de Chardin puts it, internal to the ongoing and unpredictable 'experiments and gropings' regarding the 'collective organisation' of a human group in a 'democracy' is the desire to seek (endlessly and all the time) to 'enhance rather than impair […] the incommunicable singularity of being which each of us possesses'.[19] There where such a desire holds sway, there, I believe, Nietzsche's vision of a democracy to come will have become our present reality – and that because, right there, we are not at the end of political history but in the midst of a history whose future remains open.

2. The Singularising Gaze

In an essay in which I explore the discomfort many will have felt receiving purely quantitative data reports about deaths caused by the Covid-19 virus, I introduce the idea of the singularising gaze as a counter-concept to that wholly impersonal death-register.[20] It is a point of view on the life of a living (or once living) human being which is, as Bernard Williams puts it, 'concerned primarily with what it is *for that person* to live that life'.[21] Williams calls this 'the human point of view' and represents it as one which is 'abstracted' from the 'conspicuous structures' that belong to more or less anonymous, substitutable or replaceable subject positions, positions marked by a social status or title that could be had by others.[22] The human point of view (at least partly) suspends or brackets those subject

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[19] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man*, (London: Fontana, 1971), 202.
[20] Simon Glendinning, 'Counting the Lost Ones', *Oxford Literary Review* (Vol 44, No 1, 2022), 90.
[21] Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism In Political Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 103.
[22] Williams, *In the Beginning*, 105.

positions: it concerns itself 'primarily' with a dimension of someone's behaviour that could not be, in that way, common to different people, still less common to all people.

What Williams wants to home in on, then, is what is seen in someone's behaviour when what is seen is abstracted from all structures in the living of a life that might be occupied by others, common to more than one. One's point of view would, in this way, have its primary focus on the unique and singular individual (the unsubstitutable and irreplaceable *one*) whose life is marked by its involvement with such conspicuous structures, the one whose 'my life' is typically occupied by occupying such multi-occupant subject positions and roles.

Williams does not further elaborate on the (on his account presumably) inconspicuous structures that would remain unabstracted when one takes what he calls the human point of view. A plausible candidate here are those language-game structures through which people express their experiences and thoughts, the reception of which can (sometimes) give rise to an empathic response. However, this candidate does not seem sufficient for getting in view the singularising gaze that Williams is trying to describe. After all, the language-games that human beings are trained to themselves possess a 'structural anonymity':[23] they are made to be played on more than one occasion and hence also (in virtue of that) by more than one person, by anyone. If it can make its appearance at all, the existential singularity that Williams wants to get in view can appear only within the structures of these conventionalised expression-games. Those certainly cannot be abstracted. And yet they are structures of behaviour characterised by *anyoneness*, not by what Heidegger calls the '*mineness* [*Jemeinigkeit*]' of existential singularity.[24] For that reason, what is manifest in the singularising gaze, if it really is a singularising gaze, cannot be reduced to seeing such

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[23] Simon Glendinning, *On Being with Others: Heidegger-Derrida-Wittgenstein* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), 5.
[24] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 68.

structures of behaviour. Indeed, if seeing such structures of behaviour was the only way in which the singular uniqueness of the other could possibly appear then it is not clear at all that a unique and singular person could possibly appear.

So we have a puzzle. If the singularising gaze of the human point of view is one that must be abstracted from everything that is in principle open to substitutability and replaceability, there is, basically, nothing left to be seen – certainly nothing left that would speak to the uniqueness of the existentially singular '*that person*' we wanted to get in view. On the other hand, if the retained structures are inconspicuous language-game structures, the repeatable, iterable structures of the language-games of life, then one might suppose that the singularising gaze does not single out anyone uniquely at all: it is not really singularising.

In the pandemic essay, I attempt to develop, somewhat inchoately, what I now think is best understood as a quasi-Kantian solution to this puzzle, suggesting that there is a radically inconspicuous *inner* dimension that belongs to the singularising gaze, one which really does deliver on the disclosure of 'mineness' – but not (because it is not possible) by way of the abstraction of structures that are open to substitutability and replaceability.[25] In fact, I now see it as important to acknowledge that *nothing at all* needs to be abstracted, whether it is a conspicuous structure or far less so. The quasi-Kantian thought we should instead affirm is that what we are after is not found, as Williams supposes, in the relatively inconspicuous structures of the behaviour of a living human being 'right before my eyes' but something inconspicuously 'right before my eyes' *in me* when the other is seen. At issue here is nothing describably visible in any of the structures of the behaviour that are seen. These are all marked by an essential substitutability or replaceability. Rather, as a living being that has been trained to the language-game structures of a 'my life' life-form, what is right before my eyes, what goes completely unnoticed, is my *inconspicuous familiarity* with the 'my life' that

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[25] See Glendinning, *The Lost Ones*, 93.

is *mine*. What is 'right before my eyes' here now permeates what I perceive when I perceive the behaviour of another living being under the singularising gaze: seeing *right there* an altogether other 'me'; a singular and unique 'my life' that is *not mine*. As Wittgenstein stresses, this is not a matter of 'reasoning by analogy', not a matter of observing my own behaviour and what is going on in me when I behave that way, then matching my own behaviour with the behaviour of the other, and then inferring that the same goes on in them.[26] On the contrary, what is given visibility through the lens of one's right before my eyes familiarity with 'my life' *is* the singular 'my life' of another living (or once living) being. In view here is not merely the intimacy of my perceiving what someone else is thinking or feeling but, as Wittgenstein puts it, the most intimate intimacy of my 'seeing' the 'soul' [*Seele*] of another 'living being' [*Lebewesens*].[27]

What is seen when what is seen is the soul of a living (or once living) being is not reducible to anything perceptually (sensuously) given in the reception of behavioural dispatches sent out on some tele-com-system or other (text messages, spoken or written). On the other hand, when I see the soul of a living (or once living) being nothing perceptually appears over and above what I do perceptually receive. The existential singularity – the *mineness* – of the life of another living (or once living) being really does make its appearance within the structural anonymity – the *anyoneness* – of conventionalised expression-games, but seen through the lens of the singularising gaze it is manifest there without being anything describably present there. It haunts what is visible, permeates what is seen, but it is not a visible (sensuous) *presence* – though we do, even in describing it as seeing someone's soul, *represent* it as if it was, and perhaps do so especially when, having not taken any interest in a living (or once living) human being beyond their social subject positions and titles hitherto,

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[26] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §357.
[27] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §357.

we suddenly turn a singularising gaze on someone. It's an extraordinary experience: 'It was as though a shadow had taken substance'.[28]

When he introduced the human point of view, Bernard Williams did so because he wanted to make a political observation. He wanted to make visible what he confessed was a somewhat 'hazy' connection between what is disclosed in the human point of view and the appeal in specifically modern politics to the idea of all people's equality.[29] It's hard to see through this haze, not least because the very idea of such a point of view seems to point us away from and not towards the 'all' we have in view when the idea of all people's equality is in view. And yet it is a connection between these ideas that is Williams's own explicit interest. In the next section I will do what I can to discern its outlines.

3. Politics of Friendship

Perhaps something of Williams's idea can be stated without more ado. If we take our point of departure from the idea of the singularising gaze, then we bring into view something that really is common to each in the all: namely, that every human life has the 'mineness' of existential singularity. And then, right there, we encounter another way of thinking all people's equality too, a way that finds what is common to all in the singularity of each. In (characteristically telegraphic) Derridean terms, we can say that once we come to see that 'every other is altogether other' [*tout autre est tout autre*] we cannot also distribute them in an order of rank: every other is, in that respect, 'equally' altogether other.[30]

This path to the political translation of the singularising gaze thus begins with the idea that such a gaze cannot but be experienced as something that, as Williams puts it, 'everyone is owed',[31] even if that is an infinite (and hence strictly impossible) demand. Hence, when

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[28] Margery Allingham, *Flowers for the Judge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1944)., 32.
[29] Williams, *In the Beginning*, 105.
[30] Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 22
[31] Williams, *In the Beginning*, 104.

Williams considers this translation, he is clear that it cannot entail making it so that each will, even ideally, be equally afforded what everyone is, in this way, owed, or even that it should ever be 'in the case of everyone the same'.[32] And this is, one might say, the beginning of democratic politics as a way of calculating with the incalculable (for example, of working out just who should get certain benefits) by opening a space in which any one can be respected.

Williams's conception of the human point of view introduces into our thinking about political community a sense of the universality of the singular. However, the singularising gaze is not a general, common, still less universal attitude. Not at all. In fact, Williams explicitly contrasts it with the far more common and everyday 'technical or professional attitude' (the professional attitude towards Mr Bun the Baker, for example).[33] Nevertheless, the singularizing gaze is not, for all that, unfamiliar to us. Indeed, on this score, it is anything but co-incidental that Wittgenstein's own illustration of what he calls the singularising 'attitude towards a soul [*eine Einstellung zur Seele*]' concerns a case that is completely familiar to us: the (in each case singular) relation to the (in each case singular) other we call a 'friend'.[34] Williams does not mention that case, but it seems to me to go to the heart of the connection between the human point of view and the politics of all people's equality that interests him. Indeed, it is with the experience of the friend, and the experienced rightness of that relation to the other, that we find ourselves drawn ineluctably towards the idea of its universalisation and the specification of a democratic community (a community of equals) as, precisely, a community of friends: the gathered being-together of existentially singular beings. Each one the only one – each one equally the only one.

The heritage of political thinking in the European West since Aristotle has, in fact, always drawn on a (re)presentation of the other who we call a friend, personal friends as

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[32] Williams, *In the Beginning*, 104.
[33] Williams, *In the Beginning*, 103.
[34] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment*, in *Philosophical Investigations*, Revised 4th Edition (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §§20-22.

equal partners supplying the model for ideas of all people's equality in public life.[35]

However, conceptions of all people's equality in that heritage have typically looked right past (or *right through*) the actual friend-disclosing experience which that equality-affirming politics presupposes. That is, a warrant for the affirmation of all people's equality has typically been sought for not in the singularising gaze that discloses the friend but in what might be supposed a (metaphysically or empirically) grounding objectivity underlying that experience, something present that can be identified as genuinely common among friends (*koína ta ton philōn*). The community of friends, we want to say, really should be a community of the something-in-common, a community of the like or the similar. And with that, the experience of the singularity of the friend is then itself utterly banalised into contingent human variations, where each one has their own 'lived experiences' and 'personality'.

With this contrast in view, one might be tempted to see in the conception of a specifically democratic political community that devolves from considerations of the singularising gaze an effort to 'rethink' democracy. Democracy should now be conceived, one might want to suggest, not primarily as (say) a system of self-government for some kindred human group but, first of all, in terms of a desire to affirm *both* the singularity of each *and* the equality of all. Drawing in that consideration certainly is the invitation. However, the very passage in which Derrida summarises his own affirmation of the equality of every other that is altogether other is *also* a summary of a conception of the friend that can already be discerned, if only *very* hazily, in Greek political thought – a conception of the friend that will accrue a more insistently singularising aspect once a distinctively Christian 'scansion' is introduced into this heritage, a Christian development which, even if it concerns an affirmation of 'separation and infinite distance' that 'Greek *philía*' would 'not tolerate',

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[35] Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 199.

the Greek conception of friendship in terms of reciprocal equality '*nevertheless called for*'.[36] Overall, then, it is not so much a question of rethinking democracy as recalling ourselves to the history of a political desire that has sent us on our way since Greek antiquity. And for that reason one can already discern the indistinct contours of the politics of friendship that will find its full voice in Derrida's text right from the start. Indeed, in *Politics of Friendship* one has only to read to page 22. There already, with the Greeks, Derrida can announce his conclusion:

> There is no democracy without respect for irreducible singularity or alterity, but there is no democracy with the 'community of friends' (*koína ta philōn*), without the calculation of majorities, without identifiable, stabilizable, representable subjects, all equal. The two laws are irreducible one to the other. Tragically irreconcilable and forever wounding. The wound itself opens with *the necessity of having to count one's friends*, to count the others, in the economy of one's own, there where every other is altogether other. But where every other is *equally* altogether other. More serious than a contradiction, political desire is forever borne by the disjunction of these two laws. It also bears the chance and the future of a democracy whose ruin it constantly threatens but whose life, however, it sustains, like life itself, at the heart of its *divided virtue*.[37]

'Democracy' is identified here as the best name we have for a governing regime that commits itself to satisfying a political desire fully to respect the singularity of every other (and which, for that reason, calls us to disengage from, to have nothing to do with the hitherto humiliating politics of class-difference or ethnic-difference or culture-difference or religious-difference or sex-difference distinctions that have so clearly marked the culture of the European West, none of which has gone away). But, at the same time and for the same reasons, it should also be a governing regime that commits itself to satisfying a political desire fully to respect the

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[36] Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 232.
[37] Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 22.

equality of every other (and which, for that reason, calls us to engage with, to actively resist the hitherto humiliating politics of class-difference or ethnic-difference or culture-difference or religious-difference or sex-difference distinctions that have so clearly marked the culture of the European West, and which have not gone away). This 'divided virtue' is, I think, precisely what Williams is attempting to bring into focus through his own attempt to fathom the connection between the human point of view and the idea of all people's equality, a connection which we have taken, via Wittgenstein, in a Derridean direction through the idea of the singularising gaze that gives non-sensuous visibility to the *one* we call a friend. In a community of (specifically) friends, the equality of every other is then not found in anything present, something shared as common among friends (*koína ta ton philōn*); it is not found in some (metaphysical or empirical) feature that makes them in some way or other all like or alike or kindred or similar (*mon semblable, mon frère*) but lies in recognition that we are all equally singular – each 'my life' irreplaceable, non-substitutable, unquantifiable, unique.

With the 'irreconcilable and forever wounding' imperative to fully respect both (incalculable) singularity and (calculable) equality, democratic politics thus has a distinctively aporetic and non-ideal character: it simply cannot attain a final form of ideal adequacy. One can never fully respect what one is nevertheless called fully to respect. This should not, however, be seen as democracy's failing or fault but its abiding (divided) virtue. It is not that we keep failing to get our political thinking in good enough order and so keep falling short of attaining an ideal democratic adequacy. Enduring the aporia simply means one is never done with the very thing we want to cultivate: the perfectionist desire, called for by the democratic aspiration itself, to respect both singularity and equality. Let's follow the fate of this perfectionism.

4. Perfectionism Democratised

Among the concepts that belongs centrally to the history of European democratic politics, perhaps none is as central as the 'citizen' concept. There is a way of thinking about the citizen status that is perhaps familiar: here the citizen, there the vote they can cast to choose a representative according to a regularly returning electoral calendar. Few would see this as the be-all-and-end-all of the citizen status, and most political thinkers, perhaps all, would want to affirm further political and participatory significance to the category. According to the reading of democracy as a community of friends that I have just run through, however, we should see that there is a philosophical significance to the citizen status that goes beyond questions of political participation and activism: it is a status that is inseparable from the fact that it confers a 'title' on the singular person that makes possible a way of apprehending 'the universality of the singular'.[38] No doubt there are difficult and troubling issues to be thought through here about this title, which is still a way of apprehending persons under a title that not everyone has, and thus raises the question who counts, and the not-unproblematic history of that issue. On the other hand, as Derrida has noted, the citizen title confers on those who do receive it the (in)dignity of being counted: each counting as a 'countable singularity' – a status without which all politics would be 'doomed to the incalculable',[39] i.e. simply doomed. Moreover, one might add, anything less formal and *more* friend-like in its focus on the singular 'my life' lives of the living beings who belong to the community of friends would risk a limitless extension of the political to the whole of their life – a comrade in every part – which is altogether *less* friend-like to the friend. Wherever it might conceivably appear (whether in national, supranational or international institutions) democracy, as a political response to the imperative to take account

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[38] Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 104.
[39] Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 104.

of both the singularity and the equality of every other thus opens a 'wound' that cannot be sutured: to respect the singularity of each we *must* also count each as the same. That is democracy's deathly levelling risk – but also, potentially at least, its (each) 'my life' empowering life.

But we have seen the problem: if you count them you betray the singularity of each; and if you don't count them you betray the equality of all. As a result an ideal end is not just deferred – it is simply not to be had. Some may feel that without the good news of the coming of such an arrival, without the messianic faith in a Finally Redemptive End to come, we are left standing still, left at the starting line. But doing without such an end can also be interpreted as a reason to be cheerful: it means that democracy maintains, as Jonathan White puts it, 'a structural orientation to the future',[40] and hence *is* at all only insofar as it *remains* in an 'always necessarily unfinished' condition:[41] the future then drawn into deliberations and decisions in the present as always 'open', a space in which new and as yet unattained possibilities might make their way.[42] Indeed, the commitment to ongoing, non-final, deliberations and decisions on matters of public concern necessarily extends to deliberations and decisions about our understanding of democracy itself – as the most fundamental matter of public concern of all. As I anticipated at the beginning, and beyond the interminably aporetic character of the politics of a community of friends (contending at every step with both incalculable singularity and calculable equality), to be a democracy worthy of the name is not to achieve a status attained by realising a supposedly 'perfect democracy', a state of final perfection, but is to maintain a relation to any attained democratic set-up as, precisely, not final. And that not because the end has yet to be reached but because any anticipated end would have to have the same non-finality: it too would have to affirm 'a right to self-critique'

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as a right that is never revoked.[43] On this account, ongoing non-finality is not simply 'how it is' but it is good, simply good. 'The end of politics is the end of politics', as Geoffrey Bennington puts it so well,[44] and we really don't want that to end.

From the second volume of my book on the philosophical history internal to the dominant European understanding of Europe's own history, and only lightly adapted for this essay, we can extract the following summary of what we can and what we cannot see coming there where a democratic political order is attained that does without an orientation towards an anticipated final perfection. For the purposes of this essay, the summary can take its point of departure from a reference to the Nietzschean conception of a democracy to come that we began with.

> [Nietzsche's idea of a] democracy yet to come projects an ideal way in which we might be with respect to which a contemporary perfectionist interest in emancipation or progress might take its bearings. And yet, it is resolutely non-utopian in the sense that what it does not project or promise or hope for is an end to perfectionist ambitions. *It is itself a perfectionist ambition.* But it is an odd one. As an ideal, it stands as a yet to be attained but attainable condition, to use Emerson's formulation. But this perfectionism says *nothing whatsoever* about what perfectionist ambitions might belong to such a world, it says *nothing whatsoever* about 'what it is like to be alive then', it says *nothing whatsoever* about what people there will have found to be (as Isaiah Berlin puts it) 'indispensable to their life as unpredictably self-transforming human beings' – that is simply unpredictable, beyond knowledge, and we should not want to predict anything here either. In short, it projects a way in which we might be without projecting any specific way in which we might be. Derrida will call this a messianism without messianic content; the American philosopher Stanley Cavell will call it, simply, 'perfectionism democratised'; an essentially 'open-ended thematics of perfectionism' which does entirely without 'essential definition'. As a political ideal it takes no position on

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[43] Derrida, *Rogues*, 87.
[44] Geoffrey Bennington, *Scatter I* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 243.

anyone's political position, only that there should be, for each in the all, 'as much independence as possible' in one's own political-opinion position-taking (and opposition-taking).[45]

Freed from every teleology of a future final end, this now radically open-ended future means that whatever present (past-created) institutions of democracy we find ourselves with are never encountered as historically final but always remain to be re-thought by creative political thinking to come. There is thus, as I have indicated, always a semantic void of sorts, a space left vacant, for something completely unanticipated internal to the formation of the very thing we think when we think an attained democracy. 'Attained democracy', 'democracy to the utmost', a 'truly democratic' society, 'completed democracy', etc. – if expressions like these mean anything at all, then they do not signify a teleological end-point, something to be attained as a final form of ideal democratic adequacy, but a resolute and steadfast commitment to attaining a condition that would remain, in every here and now, radically opposed to any sense of attaining a perfected state beyond further perfectionist ambitions, radically opposed to the idea of attaining a final form of democratic perfection. What is realised when a 'complete democracy' is realised is an attained condition in which the possibility of making a new step beyond any presently attained or presently anticipated condition *takes hold*.

It's a striking proposal for a democratic awakening. However, we in our day inhabit democracies that seem altogether to have lost interest in themselves beyond maintaining their present (past-created) form – they are 'in form' only for that form. But that is hardly to be 'in form' at all. The democratic world as we find it seems, in this sense, altogether done in. Can it come back to life, take hold, and go on?

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[45] Simon Glendinning, *Europe: A Philosophical History, Part Two – Beyond Modernity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 61 (lightly modified).

5. Conclusion

The creature that had conceived itself through the old testimony of 'Man' as the *ens creatum* with dominion over the earth and every living thing that creepeth on the earth, came to interpret that (deputised) sovereignty in terms of a modern philosophy of (sheriff-badged) mastery over nature. Democracy was then understood, primarily, as the attained self-mastery of popular sovereignty – political freedom conceived in terms of a community of friends that rules itself. In our time, democracy understood in this way is, it seems, no longer 'in form', and has all but run out of breath. But a new mutation, or (perhaps better) a new emphasis in our understanding of democracy is, in the vicissitudes of Europe's political history, becoming visible, and we have had our eye on it.

The times of the history of Europe's becoming modern saw the gradual introduction into European life of the political conditions of (a particular type of) electoral and representative democracy. Putting it crudely, the embourgeoisement of its socially dominant class cultivated a conception of the community of friends as an aggregate of (primarily) self-interested individuals, and a 'natural rights'-based politics of (legal) equality and (individual) freedom among *semblables*. That aggregate would comprise the all who are recognised like or alike to each other in a (paradigmatically national) self-governing community of friends all similar, all with the same self-interest in maintaining that system in which all are equal and all are free – and developing a parliamentary model in which claims to speak best to what belongs to the self-interest of that 'all' might best be heard. On this conception, attained self-government is the end of government, the end of politics – the civilisational *telos* of man and history.

When we begin to come to terms with ourselves as always possibly alive to the existential singularity of each, nascently alive, then, to ourselves as soul-seers, we cannot but, cannot not, find ourselves, right there, called, duty-called, to universalise the each-time

singular relation to the singular other who is a friend as the exemplary possibility of a respect that is owed (impossibly) to every other in the community of friends. And it will have been right then and right there, that the connection between the singularising gaze and the politics of all people's equality will have given itself be seen too: democratic politics in a community of friends now presenting itself in Teilhard de Chardin's terms cited earlier: in terms of the 'experiments and gropings' of the 'collective organisation' of a human group that seeks to 'enhance rather than impair…the incommunicable singularity of being which each of us possesses'.

The question is how we might organise a response politically to the friend-type relation to the other that bears witness to singularity. Unevenly and still inadequately, a newly new (if also in some ways very old) thought of democracy begins, and is indeed already beginning, to make itself felt in our time; the thought of being together in a community of friends is, here and there, promising to make a haze-clearing turn from a community of the common (where every (recognised) other is the *semblable*, the similar, the comparable, the like or alike) to a community of singularities (where every other – dead, alive or yet to be born – is altogether other, altogether unlike, each unique, unreplaceable, unsubstitutable). In this now appearing turn in democratic political desire, the old modern commitment to all people's *equality in liberty*, starts to surface in the language of a newly new desire for all people's *equality in singularity*. It is the (coming) politics of Nietzsche's democracy to come, where democracy is defined in a way that represents the very opposite of what Nietzsche famously railed against – democracy of the herd animal community, the community of the common.

While democratic politics in its dominant nineteenth-century concept formations (formations still very much with us today) envisaged epic developments towards an ideal democratic *telos* of attained self-mastery through popular sovereignty and self-government,

whether that was conceived as on its way to being attained by presently existing national democratic states (Fukuyama's claim) or more distantly (if supposedly imminently) on its way to being attained by an international of communist successors in a coming future present (Marx's claim), what we are now coming to see is that democratic conditions are, in principle, never ideal in this sense, and have no ideal *telos*.

The historical adventure of Europe's political modernity and the *telos* of final perfection that it promised seems more than ever to belong to our past. This does not mean that we have lost interest in emancipation or progress themselves. However, for us today this interest survives, where it does, only because, still with us, over there ahead of us, is the spectre, spirit, ghost, *Geist*, 'the apparition of the inapparent', of a democracy to come beyond all anticipation or expectation. Not haunted by a present vision of a future democracy but by a democracy to come that remains to be thought, given as *not given*, given then, in its every here and now, as a task or call to maintain a condition that *remains* hospitable to its own transformation. There where the right to take a step beyond every attained condition belongs to the attained condition, there where perfectionism is democratised, democracy is democratised too.

And in the here and now of our time, there are signs or (better) inklings of new life for a very ancient experience of the unique and singular 'soul' of every other – inklings of all people's singularity being inseparable from all people's equality, and hence the experience of the friend found, once more, inseparable from what we find most fitting for democracy. In the day of our today we are increasingly called to realise conditions in which we can, in a practical way, do justice to the fact that, as Pierre Rosanvallon has put it so well, *'everyone is similar by dint of being incomparable'*.[46] The future of democracy in our time is carried there.

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[46] Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Society of Equals*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 261.

Passing from the old discourse of Europe's modernity, a European discourse that spoke to the idea of a singular universality, a condition of universal brotherhood at the end of history, Derrida urges us to be 'the guardians' of another European idea, another idea of Europe even, that would attest instead to the universal singularity of every other, an orientation that would belong, Derrida suggests, to 'the beyond of the modern tradition',[47] the beyond of the tradition of political friendship conceived as the 'fraternity' of the like and the similar:

> I too, in fact, would like to believe in [fraternity]; or rather, there is someone in me who would like to believe it; but another, another who no longer resembles me like a brother, simply cannot bring himself to believe it, another who even believes, on reflection, and with experience, that it would be better not to believe it, not only but especially when it comes to politics. [We should recall] a series of values most often associated with that of the brother: the values of the neighbour [*prochain*] (in the Christian sense), the fellow, the *semblable* or the *like*, the other like me. I have tried to argue that pure ethics, if there is any, begins with the respectable dignity of the other as the absolute *unlike,* recognized as the other that is every bit other, the other beyond all recognition as the same, as one who is like me, resembles me. Far from being the beginning of pure ethics, the neighbour as like or as resembling, as looking like, spells the end or the ruin of such an ethics.[48]

Perhaps Derrida should have given more time to the one in him who would like to believe in fraternity. That one might have helped him reflect on the fact that, right along with the thought of democracy that we have been tracking in this essay, the experienced belonging-together that fraternity had (yes, very problematically) promised hitherto is also undergoing a shift: from an exclusively *nativist* conception to one increasingly adjusted to (let's say)

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[47] Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 29.
[48] Derrida: *Rogues*, 60 (lightly modified).

elective affinities, a conception thus freed from the pseudo-objectivities of 'blood right or land right'.[49]

On the other hand, perhaps it is already too late for any of this. Party politics in liberal democracies today seems increasingly hollowed-out and pointless; the capitalist mode of management of capital in our time increasingly life-lacking and taskless; and the general outlook can seem utterly bleak. But cleaving to the promise of (my) life in a community of friends, one finds oneself saddled, right there, with a 'pledged injunction that orders one to summon the very thing that will never present itself in the form of full presence'.[50] In this way saddled, perhaps what remains of democracy today can still give uncanny notice to a world of the future where what takes hold is not a democracy in which perfectionist desires have been brought to an end, but a democracy where, beyond anticipation, they have been brought to life.

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[49] Derrida, *Rogues*, 61.
[50] Derrida, *Specters*, 81.

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